Ernestina's Many Lives

Docked across from you (when not at sea as a sail training and education vessel), *Ernestina* is one of the oldest wooden sailing vessels afloat. The ship is also one of the last surviving Gloucester fishing schooners, one of only two remaining vessels that explored the Arctic under sail, and the last sailing ship that carried immigrants across the Atlantic to this country.

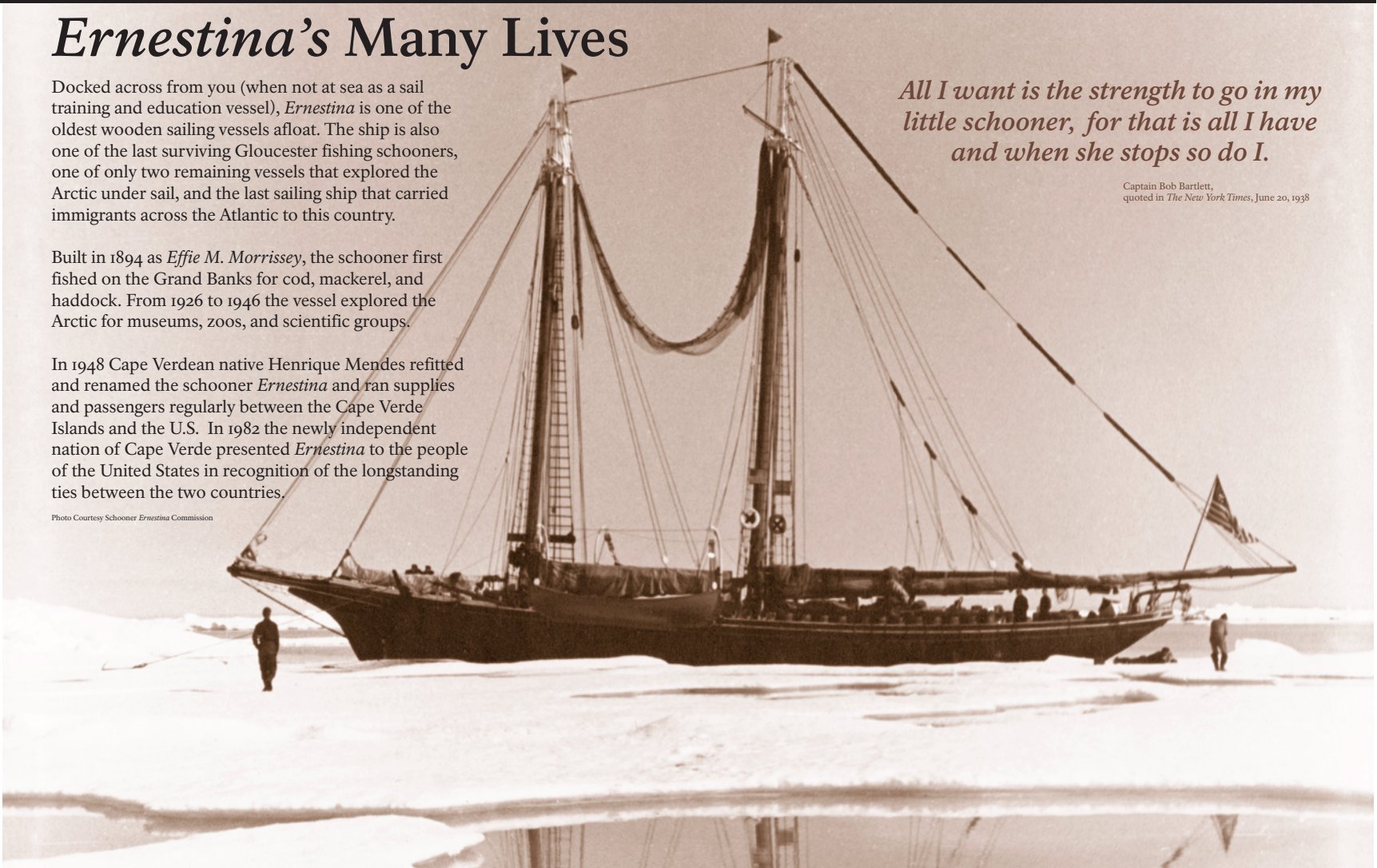
Built in 1894 as *Effie M. Morrissey*, the schooner first fished on the Grand Banks for cod, mackerel, and haddock. From 1926 to 1946 the vessel explored the Arctic for museums, zoos, and scientific groups.

In 1948 Cape Verdean native Henrique Mendes refitted and renamed the schooner *Ernestina* and ran supplies and passengers regularly between the Cape Verde Islands and the U.S. In 1982 the newly independent nation of Cape Verde presented *Ernestina* to the people of the United States in recognition of the longstanding ties between the two countries.

Photo Courtesy Schooner *Ernestina* Commission

All I want is the strength to go in my little schooner, for that is all I have and when she stops so do I.

Captain Bob Bartlett,
quoted in *The New York Times*, June 20, 1938



From Cape Verde to New Bedford

For many Cape Verde Islanders, the New Bedford wharf area was their first view of America. At the height of immigration between 1900 and 1921, more than a dozen packet boats ran between Cape Verde and New Bedford, the main port of entry. Packet boats carried freight and passengers on a regular schedule.

After World War II, as air travel increased, *Ernestina* became one of only two vessels making the regular trip from Cape Verde. The schooner continued to do so—often without engine or radio—until 1965. She was the last sailing ship to bring immigrants across the Atlantic to the United States. Many of those Cape Verdeans—people of Portuguese and African descent—still live in the New Bedford area.

Because the Cape Verde Islands were on the trade winds route to Brazil, New Bedford whaling vessels often stopped there to pick up provisions and, sometimes, crew. Perhaps 500 to 1,000 Cape Verdeans reached southeastern New England on whale ships between 1820 and 1860.

Ernestina in the packet trade, 1953
Photo Courtesy Schooner *Ernestina* Commission

Upon climbing aboard the Ernestina*…we found ourselves surrounded by beds, bureaus, boxes, mattresses, dressers, chairs, tables, chickens, and barking dogs, with people milling about.… No one could actually believe that dozens of people had embarked on this voyage, with all their worldly possessions, in a ship past her prime having no radio, setting out to cross the Atlantic Ocean!*

Frank Way Jr. of USS *Arcadia*, on *Ernestina* in Narragansett Bay, 1954

From Whales to Flatfish and Scallops

The boats you see in the harbor today are mostly commercial fishing vessels—primarily draggers and scallopers; the whaling barks of the past have long since vanished. By the 1930s, just as whaling faded and the textile industry fled to the South, a new fishing industry came to New Bedford's port. With the advent of refrigerated trucks and a growing number of fish dealers, fishermen from this region, Maine, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia, along with Norwegian and Portuguese immigrants, began to drag the Atlantic for scallops and flounder.

Men like Norwegian-born Rasmus Tonnessen helped establish the scallop fishery here, opening the New Bedford Ship Supply in 1935. Other fishing-related companies found a niche here too, like a fileting operation responding to a new trend: homemakers no longer wanting to buy and cook fish whole. With hard work and ingenuity, a modern fishing industy came of age.

One fisherman said of Rasmus Tonnessen (1908-91), "He probably single handedly helped more fishermen in New Bedford get started than any bank ever did by putting up the initial money. And he never pushed them for the money until they were on their feet." The park to your right is named for Tonnessen.

Photo Courtesy *The Standard Times*

Boats tied up at Kelly's Shipyard, located across the harbor in Fairhaven, around 1957.
Photo Courtesy John Isaksen

On the draggers in particular they were Newfoundlanders and Nova Scotians....The guys that were scalloping at that time were mostly from Maine, and shortly thereafter we had some Norwegian people come from Brooklyn, New York, bringing their boats here to try fishing. Howard W. Nickerson, 1998

Whaling Capital

In 1857, ninety-five ships and barks left these wharves on whaling voyages. In that year the industry reached its peak, and half of all worldwide whaling was conducted from the New Bedford customs district. Before petroleum was discovered in 1859, whaling was the nation's fifth most valuable industry. Nothing cast a brighter light than sperm whale oil; nothing lubricated high-speed or delicate machinery better.

The city's whaling agents, who managed voyages for vessel owners—many agents were owners themselves—were among the richest people in the United States. In 1861 newspapers calculated that if wealth were shared equally, every man, woman, and child here would have more than $1,000, making New Bedford the nation's richest city.

Notwithstanding all we had been told of the thriving condition of the town and the wealth of its inhabitants, we were unprepared to witness the forest of masts in the harbor and the crowded state of the wharves. A fleet of whale ships and other fishing vessels had a few days before returned, loaded with the most valuable spoils of the ocean. Boston *Traveller*, July 1830

The baleen or "whalebone" of right and bowhead whales made whips, corset stays, skirt hoops, and other strong, flexible goods in a pre-plastic age.

Whale ships in port, about 1870

Photos Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Working Waterfront

Standing here during the heyday of whaling you would have seen and heard the bustling of a whaling port preparing for sea: ship carpenters building vessels from great white oak timbers, and caulkers hammering oakum—hemp mixed with tar—into the ships' seams. Coopers shaped staves for casks that would hold whale oil. And packers packed barrels with hard tack for whalemen to eat at sea.

New Bedford's wharves were alive with sail riggers crawling about ship decks and masts, tarring the lines and hoisting and fastening on sails. Ship painters worked on new and old vessels afloat and dry-docked for repair. Specialized craftsmen repaired the ships' tryworks, where blubber was melted into oil. Much work and preparation was always necessary to ensure a safe and successful voyage.

Coopers made casks for many uses and each whaling vessel had a cooper onboard. Some casks were filled with provisions and others contained extra barrel staves and heads so casks could be made at sea to store whale oil.

Ship carpenters overhauled every whaler that returned to port. A typical New Bedford whaler made six voyages in its lifetime and each voyage typically lasted two to four years.

Photos Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

The wharves on both sides of the river were lined with mechanics, fitting ships for long voyages to distant seas.... Hulls were examined, weak spots strengthened, spars rigged and sails overhauled, and new bolts put in.

Old Dartmouth Historical Sketches, 1906

Merrill's Wharf

On the other side of the Bourne Counting House, the granite building in front of you, is Merrill's Wharf, completed in 1847. The wharf then was the longest in New Bedford's port. Built by Edward Merrill for an expanding whaling fleet, this wharf outfitted hundreds of vessels for voyage and offloaded them on return. The wharf provided a shipyard, pump- and block-maker, blacksmith shop, spar shop, paint shop, and space to store 20,000 barrels of whale oil.

Ship carpenters, caulkers, spar makers, riggers, sailmakers, stevedores, ship keepers, coopers, gaugers, and oil fillers scurried about Merrill's Wharf readying ships for the rigors of sea. The return of a ship to port brought merchants, mechanics, and loved ones to welcome home the crew and appraise the offloaded bounty.

There is today an odor of whale oil about Merrill's wharf, contributed by a few hundred casks of oil that happen to be stored there at this time, which brings back memories of departed days to the old citizen who gets a whiff of oil and seaweed once so familiar.

Zephaniah W. Pease, April 1916

In 1848 Merrill built the granite building you see on the wharf's south side, which became known as the Bourne Counting House for Jonathan Bourne, Jr (above). Whaling agents like Bourne set up counting rooms on the second floor and stored whalebone, ship provisions, and equipment on the first. Sailmakers and riggers occupied the third and fourth floors.

Edward Merrill retired from whaling in 1833 and built an oil manufacturing plant near here. After it burned in 1842, he decided to invest his capital "where it would not suffer" and so built the wharf that bears his name.

Photos Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

Whaling's Final Days

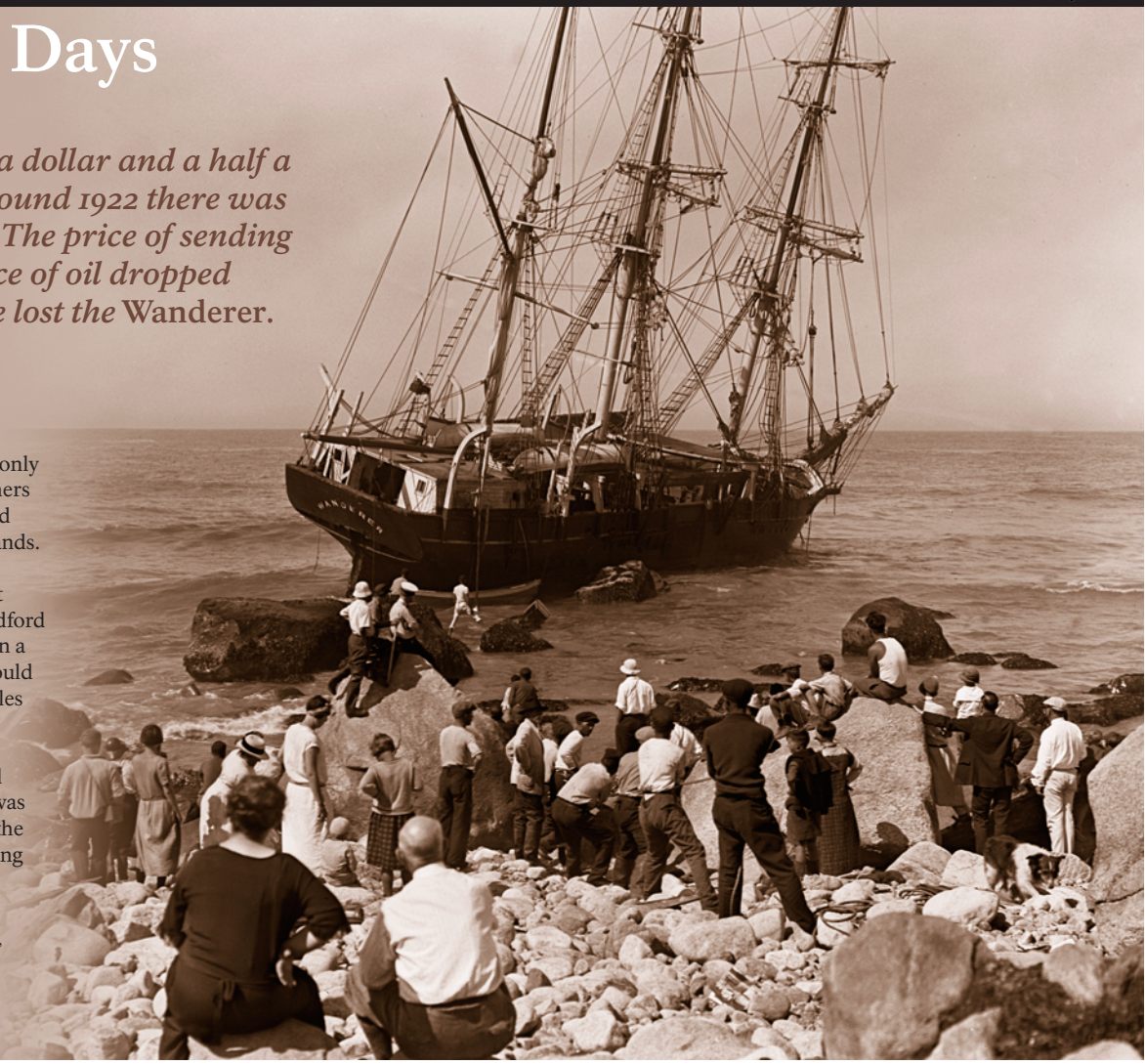
During the war, we were getting a dollar and a half a gallon for sperm oil. And then around 1922 there was no more demand for sperm oil....The price of sending a ship to sea doubled and the price of oil dropped about 200 percent....And then we lost the Wanderer.

Morris Sederholm, former whaling outfitter, October 17, 1962

By 1924 the whaling industry had returned to the grounds of its infancy—the southern Atlantic—and only a few ships and barks remained in the trade. Schooners often shipped from this port with skeleton crews and recruited men in the Cape Verde and Caribbean Islands.

In late August 1924 the whale ship *Wanderer*, the last square-rigged, three-masted vessel to leave New Bedford on a whaling cruise, wrecked off Cuttyhunk Island in a fierce and unexpected gale. The ship's small crew could not keep the vessel from running aground just 14 miles south of New Bedford.

In August 1925 the schooner *John R. Manta* returned here with only 300 barrels of sperm oil. This cargo was the last return of whale oil or bone ever brought to the New Bedford customs district–and the end of whaling from this port.



Wanderer aground off Cuttyhunk, August 1924
Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum

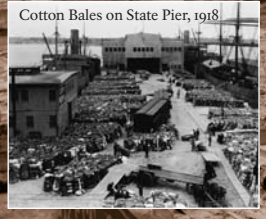
From Whales to Bales

A one-industry whaling town before the Civil War, New Bedford became a one-industry textile town afterward. Cotton bales and coal, both bound for the city's new textile mills, began to replace oil casks on New Bedford wharves.

Oil casks covered with seaweed to keep them from drying out once lined the waterfront. But as whaling profits shrank and risks grew, New Bedford investors turned to cotton. By 1900 the city was the largest producer of fine cotton cloth in the nation. By 1918, as many as 35,000 people in the city were making cotton shirts and sheets.

While the whaling business is still pursued with an energy worthy of all praise…the whistle of the steam engine, heard morning, noon and night, tells where the busy hand of labor is at work.

Mayor George Richmond, January 3, 1870



Cotton Bales on State Pier, 1918

In 1918, to speed up cotton deliveries to New Bedford and Fall River mills, the state built this pier in the place of three older private wharves. State Pier could dock the largest coastal vessels then afloat.

Photo Courtesy Spinner Publications

Casks of oil covered with seaweed, New Bedford Harbor, 1888-95

Photo Courtesy New Bedford Whaling Museum